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Help for Victims of Sexual Assault

Of the 300,000 women who are sexually assaulted each year in this country, some 25,000 suffer the added trauma of finding they are pregnant as a result of the attack. Prompt administration of emergency contraceptives could prevent most of these unwanted pregnancies. Yet, a 2002 study found that most hospital emergency rooms do not routinely offer rape victims this safe and effective option.

The Justice Department could have helped ameliorate this problem last year when it issued voluntary medical and forensic guidelines for hospitals to follow in the treatment of rape victims. But emergency contraception got no mention as a possible option in the 141-page protocol. That is a cruel omission, and yet another instance of the Bush administration allowing right-wing religious groups to set national policy on issues that relate to women's reproductive health and rights.

Looking to cut through the inertia and ideology, a bipartisan group of lawmakers last week introduced legislation that would mandate that all hospitals receiving federal funds offer rape victims emergency contraception as a matter of basic care. The measure, sponsored by Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton and Jon Corzine, both Democrats, and Olympia Snowe, a Republican, also includes provisions to ensure that women receive the necessary treatment for sexually transmitted diseases.

The Food and Drug Administration continues to dawdle over easing women's access to time-sensitive emergency contraception. We sincerely hope that Congress does not follow the F.D.A.'s lead. Rape victims deserve to be presented with all of the medical options available.

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